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ABSTRACT

What is known about freshman students, especially about their lived experience, is fragmentary and unsystematic. This study attempted to construct a comprehensive portrait of the daily experience of freshmen at the University of Guelph in Ontario, Canada. A total of 24 students (20 women, 4 men) participated in the study during a 3-month period. Quantitative data were collected by means of four standardized instruments. Qualitative data consisted of unstructured interviews and daily diaries. With regard to the former, all students were interviewed a total of six times. Topic areas for the interviews included personal identity; expectations; and relationships with parents and siblings, same and opposite sex friends, faculty, and romantic others. The diaries were maintained on a daily basis throughout the first 8 weeks at the university. What was most striking about student accounts of their daily experience was its ecological complexity. All of the students were striving to achieve a workable balance between the social, academic, personal, impersonal, subjective and objective domains. Movement from high school to university involved massive dislocation in students' daily lives. Many variables showed marked variation by gender, most of them in the interpersonal domain. Study participants were characterized by their extraordinary variety. The thrust of this research approach in general, and of these data in particular has immense explanatory and descriptive utility. (87 references) (LLL)

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TRANSITION TO UNIVERSITY:

A QUALITATIVE STUDY OF FRESHMAN DAILY EXPERIENCE.

by

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THE PROBLEM[1]

For more than a century, research interest in freshman students has been intense (eg., Horowitz, 1987; Lee, 1970). By 1932, for example, Cowley (1932) listed more than 2,000 such studies and more recent reviews (Boyer, 1987; Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pace, 1979; Smart, 1985) suggest that this interest has accelerated. The size and variety of this database support the expectation that understanding of freshman life should be voluminous, detailed and comprehensive. In fact, on both substantive and methodological grounds, what is known about freshman students, especially about their **lived experience**, is fragmentary and unsystematic.

As regards substantive content, it will be useful to distinguish between **five** sets of studies: (a) **freshman incidental** refers to studies that use freshmen as participants while the focus of the research is elsewhere; for example, Wills (1974) explored the relationship between living arrangement and self-actualization among nearly 500 students who happened to attend a freshman course in English composition at Madison College (for further examples, see Benjamin, 1988b); (b) **high-level survey** includes studies that survey large samples of freshmen across a range of dimensions; of these, probably the best known is the work of Astin (eg., 1977, 1978), which surveyed over 200,000 freshmen in over 200 American universities and colleges (see also Chickering, 1974; Gardner, 1987); (c) **needs assessment** encompasses studies that explore the needs and problems of freshmen (eg., Holdaway & Kelloway, 1987; Levin & Franklin, 1984; Moore & Hotch, 1981), including problems of separation-individuation (Philip, 1987; Powell, 1987) and the discrepancy between expectations and reality (Baker, McNeil & Siryk, 1985); (d) **comprehensive studies** are those which seek to create a comprehensive (Bushnell, 1962; Freeman, 1956; Sanford, 1956, 1962) or near comprehensive (Komarovsky, 1976, 1985; Newcomb, 1943, 1952; Newcomb, Koenig, Flacks & Warwick, 1967; Whiteley, 1982) portrait of freshman experience; and, (e) **personal accounts** involve either autobiographical (Elkins, 1985; Schwartz & Lever, 1976; Turow, 1977) or interview-based (Davis, 1977; Lamont, 1979)

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[1] This paper is taken from a monograph entitled **Freshman Daily Experience: Implications for Policy, Research and Theory** (Student Development Monograph Series, Volume 4, 1990) available from the Student-Environment Study Group, UC-423, University of Guelph, Guelph, Ontario, Canada N1G 2W1.

accounts of the freshman experience. Proportionately, the first two categories predominate, followed by category three, with only a handful of studies in categories four and five.

Collectively, this body of work has contributed immeasurably to our ability to describe freshman students but, with few exceptions, has had relatively little to say about their lived experience. This is so for various reasons. Many studies rely on aggregated data and thus refer to an abstracted, statistical construction which necessarily applies to no specific student. Other studies focus on internal states, such as student values, attitudes and self-perceptions, which correspond to an unknown extent with the actual behavior of the students in question. This is exacerbated by the fact that student responses are often gathered **before** they have any experience of university life, and so are likely to change in unknown ways (cf. Philips, 1976). Further, many studies - for example, those concerned with freshman alcohol use (eg., Donovan, Jessor & Jessor, 1983) - focus on single dimensions, which tend to ignore the important matter of how the dimension in question is related to or interacts with a range of other, equally important dimensions. Moreover, the dimensions in question are typically seen apart from any larger social context. Such efforts thus lack what Bronfenbrenner (1979) has called "ecological validity". With few exceptions (eg., Komarovsky, 1976, 1985; Moffatt, 1989), this is exemplified by a singular focus on persons and events situated on-campus and their corresponding lack of interest in persons, events and processes located off-campus, especially as regards students on-going involvement with parents (see Benjamin, 1988a). Finally, and perhaps most important, the bulk of this literature has been guided by an **adultocentric perspective** in which researchers define the categories of inquiry and select the questions that will serves as stimuli to which student participants are expected to respond. The necessary result is a biased and highly selective account of freshman life based a priori on adult concerns, interests and priorities. Freshman experience, **as seen through their eyes and told in their voice**, has only rarely been of interest.

This lack of interest is reflected methodologically, with the bulk of studies in this area reliant on cross-sectional, "static" (Baxter & Wilmot, 1986) designs and data collection methods, typically self-report beginning and/or year-end surveys, structured retrospective interviews and/or standardized instruments. Such data are most useful for certain purposes, but remain problematic in terms of the portrayal of on-going lived

experience. For example, most studies in this literature have shown an overwhelming predilection for quantitative data. Consequently, the dimensions warranting exploration have generally been those which lend themselves to Likert-type constructions; those aspects of freshman experience which are not so readily quantifiable have tended to escape inquiry (eg., Pascarella, 1985; Tinto, 1987). The unfortunate result is that, all too often, the methodological tail ends up wagging the theoretical dog. Further, there has been a tendency to define variables in ways that lack ecological validity insofar as many such studies tend to focus on one dimension at a time while ignoring other dimensions that may be contextually significant (Willems, 1969). Related difficulties include failure to take account of findings that suggest (a) the ability of participants to retrospectively reconstruct their experience is in fact quite poor (Yarmey, 1979); (b) participants are generally unable to provide reliable assessments of either their personality and/or their past experience (Fiske, 1971; Mischel, 1968); and (c) it is commonplace for participants to say one thing (with respect to their values, attitudes and/or expectations) and do another while unaware of any discrepancy between the two (Deutscher, 1973). The result, in the words of Larson and Csikszentmihalyi (1983), is that "One-time assessments appear to reflect response sets and cultural stereotypes as much as they do anything else." Put differently, this is to suggest that researchers choice of method has inadvertently **overdetermined** the responses of freshman student research participants.

The alternative is to use qualitative methods that allow freshman participants to construct their own accounts through their own eyes and in their own voice. Traditionally, these methods have included the unstructured interview (McCracken, 1988) and either observation (Becker, Geer & Hughes, 1968), participant observation (Moffatt, 1989), document analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) or some combination of such methods (Whiteley, 1982).

A fourth alternative involves the use of student **diaries** or journals. Although the use of diaries, especially time diaries, has a long history (eg., Bevans, 1913), their use with students has thus far been limited to a handful of very recent studies (Desmond & Glenwick, 1987; Duck & Miell, 1986; Hogan & Hendrickson, 1984; McCarthy, 1986; Mellon, 1986; Nezlek, Wheeler & Reis, 1983; Prather, 1970; Rabinowitz, 1987; Reis, 1986; Reis, Nezlek & Wheeler, 1980; Skipper, Prato, Camp & Hogan, 1989; Wheeler & Nezlek,

1977; Wheeler, Reis & Nezlek, 1983; Whiteley, 1982). At present, such efforts have yielded important results (Duck & Miell, 1986), although limitations in the method are evident. For example, researchers have seldom provided any instruction to students concerning how diaries are to be maintained and what range of topics should constitute their focus of attention (cf. Skipper et al., 1989). Similarly, these studies have typically sought data concerning a very restricted range of variables. Conversely, this method holds much promise in the explication of freshman experience, offering a variety of advantages over the traditional methods noted above. By encouraging students to share their experience across a range of dimensions, diaries meet the requirements of ecological validity. By insisting that students describe events and processes in the on-going present, and teaching them how to do it properly, diaries are necessarily concrete and behaviorally specific. By permitting students discretionary control over their own descriptions, diaries encourage accounts that are highly detailed. By allowing students to tie together objective events "out there" with personal responses "in here", diaries are unparalleled in their affective potence and immediacy, and provide an excellent basis upon which to evaluate the extent to which students are self-reflexive. By their routine use, typically daily or weekly, diaries ensure continuity through time. Finally, by directing students to report events as they occur, diaries are relatively free of the distortions and biases regularly associated with recall. Moreover, without exception, these studies have, first, emphasized the variability of student behavior across a range of substantive domains; and, second, by concentrating on what students actually **do** rather than what they **say** they do, such efforts have undercut both received wisdom and established theory (see Duck & Miell, 1986).

Taken together, these substantive and methodological comments underline the need for future research concerning freshman experience which is multidimensional, longitudinal, behavioral, detailed and which uses data collection methods consistent with ecologically validity. The balance of this paper presents a portion of the results of a study designed with these attributes in mind. Although inductive in character, it was nevertheless guided by a systems or ecological model (Benjamin, 1983, 1986; see also Banning, 1978; Banning & McKinley, 1980; Caple, 1987a, 1987b) that, in general, calls attention to the complex but organized character of social systems, the interdependent or cross-linked relationship between the people

who make up such systems, and the tendency of such systems towards stability (over the short term) and change (over the long term).

Within this theoretical context, the main objective of the study was to construct a comprehensive portrait of the daily lived experience of freshman participants. Secondary objectives were as follows: (a) to compare student accounts across different "domains" (see below); (b) to compare the utility of qualitative versus quantitative data in relation to the portrait noted above; and (c) to explore the findings with regard to their implications for policy, research methodology and student development theory.

In what follows, the study's methodology is described in detail, followed by presentation of the findings in the personal, interpersonal and environmental domains (see below), and concluding with a discussion of the substantive importance of these findings. Detailed exploration of the implications of these data for policy, practice, research, and theory will, in the interests of space, be deferred to a future article.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Conducted by the Student-Environment Study Group, data collection was on-going at the University of Guelph (Guelph, Ontario, Canada) during the period September 3 (three days prior to registration) to December 15 (end of the first semester), 1988. The University of Guelph has an undergraduate population of about 11,000; of all entering students, the majority are female (61%) and live in residence halls (65%). To recruit participants for the study in question, a presentation was made to three groups of summer orientation students, 125 in total. Of these, 62 (50%) agreed to take part. Subsequently, 37 (60%) actually contributed some data, with 24 (drop-out rate: 35%) continuing as active participants throughout the data collection period: 20 women and four men.

Despite the qualitative focus of this study, quantitative data were of interest for three reasons: (a) to provide one basis for establishing the trustworthiness of the qualitative data (see below); (b) to address specific questions less amenable to qualitative data analysis, including the extent to which sample students were similar or different to others in the entering student population; and (c) to ensure some degree of

comparability with the existing research literature. Accordingly, these data were collected by means of **four** standardized instruments. These included: (a) the Incoming Student Information Form, a slightly modified version of the main survey instrument used in Astin's (1978) Cooperative Institutional Research Program freshman survey; (b) the Student Developmental Task Inventory [SDTI-2] (Winston, Miller & Prince, 1979), a measure of psychosocial development; (c) the Symptom Checklist [SCL-90R] (Derogatis, 1982, 1983), a measure of stress and psychophysiological functioning; and (4) the FACES III (Olson, 1986), a measure of family dynamics. All measures have been widely used and all report high levels of reliability and validity (Astin, 1978; Derogatis, 1983; Olson, 1986; Winston et al., 1979). With the exception of the SCL-90R, all instruments were completed once only, soon after the student's arrival on campus; the SCL-90R was completed three times, on arrival, at about six weeks, and again at about 12 weeks. Additional quantitative data from the Student Tracking System included: high school leaving grade average; first and second semester grade average; academic program; and, where appropriate, residence building.

Qualitative data consisted of **unstructured interviews** and **daily diaries**. With regard to the former, all students were interviewed a total of **six** times (see Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Interview protocols employed a series of unstructured probe questions in **six** topic areas (in no particular order of importance): (a) personal identity; (b) expectations and reality of university life; (c) relations with parents and siblings; (d) relations with same and opposite-sex friends, especially roommates; (e) relations with faculty; and (f) relations with romantic others. Entry and termination interviews (60-90 minutes each) were audio recorded and subsequently transcribed, with accumulated interview pages totalling about 2500. Interviews were conducted by student affairs staff members who were trained specifically for this study and who were each to act as a "buddy" to between one and four students.

The diaries were maintained on a **daily** basis throughout the first **eight weeks** at the University. While students were given flexibility in formatting their diary entries, all students were provided with a 15-page written manual prepared for this study. This set out minimal topic areas and provided practical advice as to appropriate recording procedures. Specifically, for any given context and/or time period, students were asked to specify: **who** was present, **what** they were doing (as well as what they thought and felt), **where** this

occurred, **when** this occurred, and, where appropriate, **why** they thought it had occurred, that is, what explanation they thought might apply. In addition, students were provided with a small notebook which they used to make jotted notes of events as they transpired during each day, these notes to be used to flesh out complete diary entries every day or two. Completed diary entries, with pages consecutively numbered, were handed in roughly every 10 days at which time two photocopies were made - working and archival copies - and the original returned to the student. The completed diaries averaged 69 pages in length (range: 23-132 pages), with students who completed all requirements of this study collectively yielding a total of about 2500 diary pages. For their participation in this study, students were provided with three "meals cards" - one on entry, one at six weeks and one at 12 weeks - with a total value per student of about $21.

Analysis of the qualitative data involved **two** phases, **thematic analysis** and **establishing trustworthiness**, respectively. Thematic analysis involved **four** steps. First, all diaries and interview transcripts were carefully read for the major domains into which the material seemed to divide. Second, these data were then read a second time in an effort to identify specific themes within each domain. For purposes of the present study, a theme was operationally defined as **any set of words, phrases or sentences which coherently reflected a specific underlying meaning, feeling or activity**. In addition, to be retained in the analysis, any given theme must have been identifiable in the diaries and/or the interviews of not less than 35% of study participants. In other words, thematic analysis was intended to capture themes **representative** of students rather than their idiosyncratic thoughts and feelings. Third, these data were then read a third and final time, with two ends in mind: first, to verify and finalize the list of themes, with an eye to specific linkages across domains; and, second, to select **exemplars**, in the form of quotation extracts, illustrative of each theme (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Exemplars were then placed on 5" x 8" file cards, along with all pertinent identifying information, and then filed by theme. Using this method, a total of 894 quotations extracts were obtained, 604 from the diaries and 290 from the interviews. Final selection of the exemplars actually cited in the text was made on the basis of the clarity with which an exemplar expressed a particular theme and a careful effort to use exemplars from all students and not just those that were the most articulate or incisive. In what follows, all exemplars will be identified using a code such as the following: [105F/D SE07]. Translation:

student (control number 105), female (F), diary extract (D) dated September 7 (SE07)(1988). To protect student confidentiality, exemplars may have been edited, as indicated by the presence of square brackets.

Establishing trustworthiness (see Lincoln & Guba, 1985) relied on triangulation and a form of member-checking. Triangulation involved **four** sets of comparisons: (a) the diaries were examined for internal consistency, especially as regards entry and closing accounts; (b) where applicable, qualitative and quantitative data were compared; (c) diary and interview data were compared; and (d) diary findings were compared against findings in the research literature. These eforts yielded a corresponding series of insights, as follows: (a) in light of entry data, retrospective reinterpretation was not uncommon in closing accounts; (b) in some instances, the quantitative data spoke to issues not addressed in student diaires (eg., level of family dysfunction, family socioeconomic status) while in other cases the two sources of data were typically consistent; (c) interviews were often used to address issues that were not a primary focus of student diaries (eg., faculty conduct in the classroom) and thus served as an important basis for qualifying diary accounts; and (d) where applicable, the qualitative data was highly consistent with findings in the literature, especially as regards student friendship.

Member-checking involved **two** procedures. First, in addition to the author, who read the diaries and interview transcripts in their entirety, the buddies read all the material derived from their students. Second, two round tables discussion were convened, with a total of 40 forty participants, including undergraduate students (several of them freshmen), faculty, and adminstrative and student service staff. The voluminous comments of the buddies and the round table participants were then used to adjust and finalize the results, both as regards content and form of presentation.

Finally, student diaries were used as the basis for a rudimentary effort at quantification. This involved a total of 19 variables, including, for example, adjustment, illness, fatigue, workload, and so on. For illustrative purposes, the following is the operational definition of one such variable: **Adjustment**: students who, by the end of September, reported establishment of stable behavioral routines, feelings of satisfaction with their present situation and little sense of homesickness were rated **fast adjusters**; those who reported continuing difficulty with any or all of these items past September, were rated **slow adjusters**.

RESULTS

In their original form, the findings were organized in terms of **domains**, **subdomains** and **themes**. Three primary domains were distinguished: **personal**, **interpersonal** and **environmental**. Each domain was then broken down into 2-4 subdomains, with each subdomain explicated in terms of a series of 2-6 themes. In total, 36 themes were identified, with each theme documented and discussed in light of a series of exemplars.

In the interests of space, these data will be presented here in the form of a summary of **key** findings, with domain and subdomain divisions retained. Thematic divisions, however, have been deleted. Similarly, only a handful of exemplars have been included for illustrative purposes only.

Domain 1: PERSONAL

The **PERSONAL** domain breaks neatly into **two** subdomains concerned, respectively, with the **psychological** and the **academic** life of students.

Subdomain: PSYCHOLOGICAL. In the psychological subdomain, students emphasized the stressful character of freshman daily experience, with most students confronted on arrival with some degree of culture shock, including feelings of isolation, disorientation, depression, and homesickness (67% low, 29% moderate, 4% severe). Related psychophysiological states were also reported, especially some combination of fatigue (100%), sleep disruption, symptoms of flu-like illness (79%, mean frequency 1.6, frequency range 1-4, duration 3-5 days) and, in some cases (21%), weight loss (range: 5-15 pounds). The impact of symptoms as well as their cross-linkage, both with each other as well as with other domains, is suggested by the following comments:

> My cold is getting really bad ([girlfriend's] is too). I didn't get to sleep until 5 AM, so I decided to sleep instead of going to my first class [course]. [130M/D SE26].

> I missed my class at 8:00 this morning. Too tired, haven't been getting good sleep. I've been really busy, last weekend I was really upset with my Dad, he's acting strange, and I was worried about my gran and granny. The fact that I'm not getting my homework done has been getting me down. I've been confused in some of my subjects and its been worrying me. [105F/D SE30].

While some combination of these various processes was virtually universal across students, their severity and duration varied considerably and, in turn, served as indicators of student adjustment. Thus, about one third of students adjusted quickly and easily, another 40% took longer to adjust and found the process somewhat more difficult, while about a third of students required to the end of the semester before their adjustment was complete, with their experience reported as especially painful.

In this context, adjustment was further related to student self-esteem. In the majority of instances, on arrival women were more likely than their male counterparts to report low intellectual and social self-esteem. Subsequent shifts in esteem were associated with the process of adjustment. Thus, some students showed little change throughout the semester, others reported positive changes, while still others reported some deterioration. The following comments illustrate the relationship between adjustment and self-esteem as well as the importance of social relations in mitigating or exacerbating either:

> I find it hard sometimes to feel that I belong because of my personality, and I know that it's my personality that ... Like I've always been really shy and nervous in new situations. And everybody seems to know somebody and be having a really good time. So that makes me feel like kind of abnormal or something, for feeling bad. Not that I expect everybody to help me, I just find it hard sometimes to fit in, in the general population. Just talking, doing things, or the parties or whatever. Everybody already seems to have their group of friends and I wonder how they did that so quickly! [154F/I SE27].

> I thought that when I came here, I would make a lot of new friends and I'd have a great time; it's not working out the way I thought it would. Both [roommate] and I, and [close female friend] too,

have found that a few of the girls in our [residence] house are nice enough to say hello [to], but most of them are very unfriendly. [147F/D SE30].

Subdomain: ACADEMIC. If social relations were one basis for changes in student adjustment and self-esteem, another related to their experience of academic work. In this respect, 43% of students arrived on campus with a grade 13 average in the 'A' range. By the end of the first semester, only 13% had retained their 'A'. By the end of the second semester, that proportion had dropped to 9%. Overall, 67% of the participants showed a decline in grade averages of between one and two grade points.

The bases for this decline appeared to involve an array of interrelated factors, with only some of these academic in character. For example, students universally reported being overwhelmed by the workload and, concomitantly, unable to keep up. The following comments capture this common sense of being overwhelmed, of the strain this may entail, and of the importance students attached to balancing academic work and social relations:

The work, the workload. That's my main concern. It's how much time to spend on what and will I have time to do everything. What am I going to do when mid-terms roll around. And things like that. Like watching the schedule and things like that. That's a big worry. I can really see myself just burning myself out, like every night this week I'm staying up 'til twelve o-clock doing homework. Right after dinner up until then, just go straight through. And in the afternoons I have classes and plus I've got other activities. [119F/D SE15].

I felt so wiped out after the whole day that I was not in a very good mood. Wanted to be by myself but of course my Mom and Dad wanted to be with me. Finally, felt so frustrated that I left the room, went to my bedroom and cried and cried so hard FOR NO REASON!! I couldn't believe how much I was crying. I figured out later that it must have been my tiredness (didn't get to sleep until 3 AM Thurs[day] and had an 8 AM class) and all the release of my tension from the anxiety of having a midterm [exam]. [169F/D OC07].

> Do this and do this and do this and get it done. You can't have any social life if you've got something else [academic] to do. This week-end, got up 7:30 [AM] Friday morning and went to bed at 6:30 [AM] Saturday morning and slept for three hours. I wasted a lot of time, but it's really hard to [concentrate], right now. I had mid-terms last week, I had five mid-terms in two days, I just needed something to relax. Maybe next semester when I get away from all the introductory courses. But it seems like they try and cram so much in. If you have sixty pages in a chapter, there's going to be 120 or 240 different topic ideas. And if you're responsible to know all of them in one chapter, and then you're responsible for twelve chapters, and you have five subjects and you have to do the same thing. It's just sort of MIND OVERLOAD! [162F/I DE05].

Related processes included the following: (a) the lock-step character of the semester system which made it easy to fall behind given even a small disruption in a students academic output; (b) the "hidden curriculum" (Becker et al., 1968) formed out of students perception of faculty members covert assumptions and standards, and students efforts to circumvent and/or pre-empt those assumptions; (c) classroom size, with small classes overwhelmingly preferred and large classes addressed through a process of psychological shrinkage, that is, limiting one's conscious attention in class to the handful of individuals who were personal acquaintances; (d) the feedback effects of good or poor academic performance, with the latter often feeding forward to undermine motivation, self-esteem and impair subsequent performance; and (e) classroom dynamics, especially relations with peers and with faculty, with the former seen as essential but less satisfying than expected, and the latter typically distant and mitigated by students' assessment of the faculty member qua teacher on a goodness-badness continuum. The following short series of comments illustrate classroom-based relations with peers and faculty. Note especially the final comment which calls attention to the influence of (following Laing, 1969) "campus ghosts", namely, significant others (for example, parents or romantic partners) who shape the daily conduct of students while seldom physically present on campus:

[Course] again at 8 [AM]. What a killer. [Male] wasn't there, he hasn't been there for the past two lectures. I'm really disappointed. It was kind of nice to have someone to talked to, although we often talked through the whole lecture. Oh, well, maybe he'll be there tomorrow. [133F/D OC05].

If I could I would drop [the course]. I don't really like it. It is very boring and today I nearly fell asleep. No one seems to be very friendly in the class unless they know you. I find it difficult to function in this kind of environment. [162F/D SE19].

My brother and all his university friends have said that [that] is really all you are, a number. So unless I had some sort of problem I needed to discuss I would feel intimidated to go up to a professor and ask him something, a question that was concerning me. But I don't think there will be some sort of relationship. Actually I think if I had a problem with a course outline I would probably discuss it in my seminars. As far as my professor goes, I don't intend to have any sort of relationship there. [118F/I SE15].

Well, it's obvious some of [the faculty] don't give a shit about teaching introductory courses. They pretend, you get the feeling that they're going through the motions 'til you get up to the higher courses where they have to pay attention to you. I suppose you're not in their major so, definitely a feeling of you're not important. Not that you were necessarily important in high school, but you'd normally get one teacher to listen to you. Most of [the profs] are scientists or researchers rather than teachers and it shows. There are some that are naturally good at teaching, but there's some that you can tell would rather be doing research and don't feel comfortable lecturing. [130M/I JA08/89].

Sat through [professor's] boring lecture. I feel lost for the first time. Ack! Too excited about going home [to parents] on Friday to concentrate. [123F/D SE27].

Discussion. This portion of the findings coincide with much that is 'traditional' in the freshman research literature. In that sense, these findings warrant brief discussion in their own right.

In relation to the research literature, these data are ironic in two sense. On the one hand, they accurately reflects the approach to understanding the freshman experience currently prominent in the literature. That is, one that (a) concentrates on the psychological states of entering students; (b) treats these states in relative isolation from other events, processes or persons in the campus environment; and (c) thus ignores the larger social context in which these states are embedded, given meaning and, indeed, may be said to derive. On the other hand, these data demonmstrate the theoretical, and thus the explanatory, paucity of such an approach. Though only part of a larger database, student comments begin to suggest the extent to which **cross-linkage** is pervasive in the daily lives of entering students. As used here, cross-linkage refers to the interaction between events and processes, either across domains or across subdomains within a single domain. Thus, for example, a host of significant others, both on- and off-campus, routinely and continually affect student psychophysiological responses, long- and short-term adjustment, self-esteem and, indirectly, academic performance. Students' adjustment and academic performance were similarly cross-linked. In light of these findings, the current tendency to ignore such linkages or to treat them as a source of statistical "noise" produces fundamental distortions in the effort to apprehend the freshman experience.

In a similar vein, the tendency of specific variables to interact in such a way as to form into feedback loop or "vicious" circles is especially noteworthy. Sleep disturbance, missed meals, bouts of illness, the demands of social relationships, and academic performance were **not** separate processes; rather, they were merely different facets of the same loop. For example, lack of sleep, missed meals, and chronic fatigue all acted to undermine academic performance. But poor performance motivated increased effort, as students tried harder to improve their grades. In turn, this meant lack of sleep, missed meals, chronic fatigue, and - a new element - increased vulnerability to illness that further undermined peformance, and so on. The importance of this insight is twofold: (a) it suggests the futility of any well-intentioned effort to altered any one element while ignoring all others; and (b) it enjoins researchers and policy-makers, respectively, to

understand and disrupt the **cycle** whose potent impact on students resides in no one item seen alone but rather in the cumulative effect.

Further, the emphasis of universities and students on a single outcome of all student activity, grades (Becker et al., 1968), belies the complex array of factors that, singely or in combination, contribute to their production. Again, the notion of the loop offers an extraordinarily apt metaphor. In this regard, student accounts suggest that relevant variables operate at two different levels: **macro** and **micro**. Macro-level variables are those whose effects are global in character, for example, transition stress, the discrepancy between expectations and experience, the workload, and so on. Interaction among these variables tend to take the form of a loop. For example, transition stress may be exacerbated by a heavy workload the effects of which were potentiated by the characteristics of the semester system. In turn, a related decline in grades set in motion a self-fulfilling process, lowering self-expectations and thus performance so that freshmen were frequently locked in to whatever grade they ended up with at the end of semester 1.

In contrast, micro-level variables are those whose effects are specific, for example, classroom size, and classroom social dynamics. Here, another loop can be seen which acted as a source of variation. For example, transition stress was lower for students in small as opposed to large classrooms. Similarly, classroom size affected the range of opportunities for developing supportive peer relations. Further, these micro-level processes, while not specifically linked to academic performance, were associated with student comfort, and satisfaction, outcomes that mitigated corresponding macro-level processes. Peer support, for example, could mitigate the effects of workload pressure. Thus, it appears that micro-level and macro-level processes were loosely coupled (Weick, 1969, 1976), likely the result of their divergent structural characteristics. Macro-level processes are highly structured and nearly invariant; the requirement that freshmen take five courses per semester is not subject to debate or negotiation. In contrast, micro-level variables are characterized by variability; small class size increases the likelihood of a supportive peer group, but does not guarantee it. Consequently, while some things about the first semester are fairly certain - typically stressful, with a lowered grade average the norm - the extent to which it was simultaneously comfortable or satisfying varied tremendously across participants. The result is the beginnings of a **value-added model** of

academic performance in which the effects of macro-level variables are mediated by micro-level variables that change the "value" of the former while "adding" their own independent effects.

Domain 2: INTERPERSONAL

The **INTERPERSONAL** domain divides into **three** subdomains concerned, respectively, with social relations with **friends, romantic partners** (boyfriends or girlfriends), and **family members.**

Subdomain: FRIENDS. In an earler article (Benjamin, in press), it was suggested that academic processes constituted only one basis for explaining student academic performance. Another concerned interpersonal relations, that is, the on-going interpersonal relationship between students and their friends, their romantic partners, and their parents (and other family members). Indeed, of the two, social processes appeared to predominate. Further, and ultimately perhaps more important, such relations were highly influential in their own right and thus played a critical role in determining the students quality of life, their satisfaction and their adjustment.

As for same-sex friends, they were central to students daily experience. However, friends did not constitute a homogeneous subset of others. Rather, several different categories of friends could reliably be differentiated. Old old friends were those left behind when the students came to university and most of these relationships were at high risk of dissolution. The following comments illustrate the sadness of such dissolution and its roots in the loss of context markers, namely, the daily minutae which make for a shared meaning system (Benjamin, 1983):

> I found that [for] alot of my friends [back home] the idea of our group splitting up and not being as close as before, that bothered a lot of them. I just sort of took the attitude that we're going away, we're all going to be meeting new people, when we see each other again, we're still going to be friends. We spent a lot of time together and nothing's going to take that away from us. But we're probably not going to be as close as we were before. And that's life. [113F/I SE15].

> [Seeing my old friends again] was weird. I went back and I found [them]. It was nice to see people again, it was an experience. I found a lot of people you see you realize that you're already growing apart. Like you say, "Hi, how's school?" You don't have that much to talk about. Because all that common ground you had in high school is gone, you still have the common experience of being at university, but all the common experiences you had while you were in high school [together] are going [ie., fading away]. [101M/I NV28].

Old new friends were those who accompanied students to university from high school and they were doubled-edged in character, an important source of support but also a drawback in making new friends. This notion is illustrated by the following comment which also serves to accent the critical role friends play in defining the university experience for freshmen as either positive or negative, satisfying or distressing:

> Having friends on campus from her high school, rather than being a benefit, was a hindrance to making new friends. The old friends moved into new circles and she no longer felt that she had much in common with them. Because she had relied on them for companionship, she hadn't moved into new friendship circles to any great extent. She found herself isolated and left out of all the new groups around her. She had never before had problems with making new friends and had sunk into hopelessness when faced with being a "loner." That contact [she made] with a girl as distressed as herself opened doorways for her to get some new confidence and come "out of my shell". [buddy of 169F/I OC13].

Roommates were those about whom students had the highest expectations on entry. These expectations were seldom realized; by the end of the first semester, about one third of female roommates were in 'best friend' relationships, two-thirds were in 'intimate acquaintance' relationships, while all the male roommates were in 'pseudointimate' relationships. The following short series of comments illustrate the extraordinarily high expectations many students had of roommates and the extent to which they were met via the three types of relationship noted above. Note in particular the different ways in which female and male students think about 'friendship' (see Rubin, 1985), that is, females in terms of intimacy and "talk," males in terms of cordiality and action.

I was not "nervous" about being away from home by myself, which surprised me. This confidence, I guess you could call it, comes partly from the fact that my roommate is so super. [Name] is the perfect "roomie" for me. We share some common background and interests and our personalities are much alike. She makes me feel much more at ease than even some of my best friends would as roommates because she's more like me than they are. [144F/D SE05].

For the past month or so, its only been the girls on the same [residence] floor and me. It's only been all of us. We stick together and we got closer. So we study and we take our breaks together, we talk, and talk, and talk. Its amazing, we never run out of things to say. We just talk, get carried away, go get food to eat together, come back and talk again. We just stick together. [156F/I DE01].

But [name] and I, it started slowly. But we've gotten to be very good friends. We talk, we respect each other, we'll tell each other little exciting titbits of our life. We didn't really say we were going to exchange gifts [for Christmas], but I just told her, one day, way back in early November, I bought Christmas cards, but I said, "I can't show you one!" We never openly discussed whether we would exchange gifts, but I wasn't going to mention it to her just because I said whether she gives me a gift or not, I want to give her one. [120F/I DE14].

Later in the afternoon, I got a ride back to the university from [couple]. I slept most of the way and only woke up when we were almost there. I was glad to be back but [roommate] had to spoil it. On Friday night, after Commencement, I went to a bar with a couple of my friends. [Roommate] went to a different bar. Now she's mad and even says that anyone who wasn't with her is not her friend. How childish!!! And I have to live with her until April! [133F/D NV06].

[My roommate and I] get along pretty well. We're not the goodest of buddies. I don't think we'll be great friends after university. I think after a year or so, if we're not roommates again, we'll probably drift apart as friends, but for now, he's an alright person to be with. It's better than with

somebody who's noisy and doesn't care what they're doing, and doesn't care about you. I'm quite pleased [with] my roommate. [101M/I SE28].

Finally, irrespective of the category of friend, all friends were simultaneously sources of support and demand, such that time spent forming and maintaining friendship relationships usually meant time **not** spent doing academic work. Consider the following example, noting in particular the relationship between the demands of friendship and their impact on academic work:

I can't believe this happened to me. Last night I stayed up pretty late studying. When I finally went to bed I was exhausted. Then, at 2:30 AM the phone rings. It was [roommate's] boyfriend, [name]; figures. To make a long story short he was lonely and wanted to talk to her but she was tired and kept hanging up on him. Of course, he kept phoning back. By 3:00 AM I was still awake. Finally, this silly game stopped and I went back to sleep. About an hour later I was awakened by a knock on the door and what do you know, it was [male]. I wasn't very impressed with this visit and of course I was too awake to go back to sleep... [The next day] the [course] midterm was unreal. I don't think I did very well. I was pretty distracted throughout the test and all I could think of was my bed, and I don't even get to sleep. [133F/D NV15].

Subdomain: ROMANTIC PARTNERS. Much the same was true of romantic partners, in this case, boyfriends since none of the male students were romantically involved on entry. Of the women, on entry two thirds were involved in a romantic relationship with a boyfriend. Of those so involved, the importance of these relationships could not be exaggerated, as in the following dramatic example:

I mentioned before, [boyfriend] is very much part of me, and the thought of waiting longer to see him is unbearable. I get even more angry [at him] when he tries to change the subject, then he hears my sniffles. After convincing him that I want to be alone for a week, I throw the phone against the wall in frustration. Doesn't he understand how much I need him? Doesn't he need me as much? I am disappointed and angry of how he seemed to have deserted me. I wander through

> the golf course behind my residence, bawling, thinking of all the bad things, feeling lost, friendless and devastated. I feel sorry for myself and sob even harder. [112F/D SE22].

Again, however, romantic relationships were not all alike. Rather, two categories could reliably be distinguished: those that were stable on arrival and those that were unstable. Relationships among stable romantic partners were characterized by voluminous communication covering a wide range of topics, frequent contact (both by telephone and in person), and mutual feelings of closeness and intimacy. Such relations are illustrated by the following comment:

> I wanna see m'baby! It's so nice to hear his voice over the phone! Although in a lot of ways I'm glad he's not here (I'm not always around him here, so I can make my own [new] friends), I also really miss him. Sigh. Long-distance relationships are a bitch, but I sure wouldn't trade this one in for anything!!! I'm in love and I'm loved! Yeah! [SE10]. It's so nice to be in love while I'm here. Occasionally I wonder what it would be like going out with some of the guys here, but I know none could compare (to me) with [boyfriend], and I know [boyfriend's] the one - the only one - I want. [SE14]. [Male] is incredibly attractive and soft-spoken! (Yeah, I know I'm in love with [boyfriend]! Does that mean I have to be blind?) [113F/D OC04].

Relationships among unstable romantic partners were characterized by limited communication, infrequent contact, and mutual or individual feelings of isolation and separation. Among the latter alone, 75% broke up temporarily or permanently during the semester. The stormy and unsatisfying character of such relations is evident in the following comment:

> [Boyfriend] is really beginning to get on my nerves. He has no interest whatever in meeting any of the friends I have made [at the university]. He wants to organize all my free time doing special things with him (ie., movies, seeing <u>his</u> family, <u>his</u> friends, etc.). Whenever I suggest going to (one of the bars on campus) he says he "doesn't want to go to gay places like that!" Jerk! Anyhow, I think it's just that he's scared of meeting people because he knows no one on campus except me! [139F/D SE21].

Finally, given the salience students attached to such relationships, irrespective of their satisfaction with them, it is hardly surprising that when faced with a choice between involvement with their romantic partner and academic work, the former was nearly always given preference. Consider the following dramatic example and, in the second comment, the perceived inevitability of just such occurrences when work and romance collide:

> It was a horrible weekend. I couldn't write Saturday 'cause I was a mess. I'm still a mess. I've tried studying for my [course] mid-term...it's awful.... [Boyfriend] was starting to drink too much and I kept telling him that I wasn't getting to impressed and he should stop. He didn't. Suddenly, he started to cry. He ran into the bathroom. I freaked out. [Male] went and talked to him. They went for a walk. [Boyfriend] got pretty violent. I stayed here and cried while [female] and [roommate] consoled me. [Boyfriend] phoned and said he wasn't sure whether he could come back tonight. That made me throw up. At around midnight he came in. Fell down on my bed, told me he was sorry and fell asleep. I phoned [male] and [male] told me [boyfriend] feels worthless. He doesn't feel he's worthy of me. I cried a lot... I just held him all night long. Telling him that I loved him and that he was my baby. I'm so shaken up by this, I'm beyond words... I can't study [course]. I slept today for about four hours. I felt a little better after that, but still very exhausted. [149F/D OC22/23]. I went into my [course] midterm very calm. I knew five out of 32 questions. I came back to the residence and slept. [149F/D OC24].

> I think that boy-girl relationships are hazardous to school work. I would say to try to avoid them during school except that it is very difficult to do so because it is so easy and natural to develop a crush on someone. [134F/D SE19].

Subdomain: FAMILY MEMBERS. Finally, parents (and other family members) are typically given very short shrift within the higher education literature (Benjamin, 1988). Such was not the case among most students for whom parents were highly salient figures. This said, variation across the families of students was the norm in at least two senses.

First, student's scores on the FACES III provides one way to describe family variation. For those unfamiliar with this instrument, it assesses families in two ways: in terms of their position on two dimensions of family relating, cohesion (extending from enmeshed to disengaged) and adaptability (extending from flexible to rigid); and, in terms of 'distance' from the point of intersection, rather like a shooting target. Those closest to the center, the bullseye, are "balanced" and thus least likely to display symptoms under stress. Those somewhat further out are in the "mid-range" and thus somewhat vulnerable to stress-induced dysfunction, while those farthest out are "extreme," and so most vulnerable to stress. However, since this is not a diagnostic instrument, FACES scores are not used to predict corresponding scores on measures of psychopathology, that is, those who score "high" on FACES may still score within the 'normal' range on other diagnostic tests. In this context, on the basis of the freshman literature alone, it was expected that most students would score in the "balanced" range, a handful in the "mid-range," and few (if any) in the "extreme" range. In fact, 29% of students scored in the "balanced" range, 42% in the "mid-range," and 29% in the "extreme" range.

In accord with this indication of family variation were students diary accounts of various behaviors most of which are associated with family dysfunction. These included the following: (a) 50% who had had a personal experience with death within the past two years, with deaths among their extended family typically related to illness or suicide while death among their peers was usually associated with alcohol-related traffic fatalities; (b) 20%-30% who reported personal experience with alcoholism, divorce, out-of-wedlock pregnancy, non-academic failure and anorexia/bulimia; and (c) 5%-10% who noted personal experience with physical disability, learning disability, stomach ulcers, arthritis, migraine headaches, date rape, and childhood sexual abuse.

Second, thematic analysis of students dairies indicated that the affective importance of relations between parents and their student offspring varied considerably. Careful reading of student diaries supported the distinction between **four** family types in terms of the degree to which students felt free to act independently of their parents. They are defined as follows: students from **fragile independent** families were typically highly involved with their parents and quite dependent upon them; those from **affectionate**

independent families had a flexible and relatively autonomous relationship with their parents; those from **hostile independent** families had a rigid, rather distant relationship with their parents, while those from **pervasive independent** families appeared to care little for or about their parents and led lives totally separate from them. Some sense of how students from these different family types perceived their parents can be seen in the following comments:

> **Fragile independent**: I thought about this weekend all day long. I know I maybe should stay [at the university], but all week long I have had more and more tension building inside me. I need to go home and relax. I called Mom from the pay phone (still can't use mine) and told her to phone my room. She did and I had a good cry! She is coming to pick me up tomorrow at 4:30 [PM]. I feel better already. [154F/D SE08]. I am so glad to be home! SO GLAD!! [154F/D SE09].
>
> **Affectionate independent**: The Thanksgiving weekend has been very purgative for her. Was tense and uptight at the beginning. Spent hours the first day weeping copiously, not for any particular reason; she thinks it was just the general tension and it was so good to be home where she could be herself. She was ashamed about snapping and being bad tempered, but once the crying had left her "washed out" and relaxed, she was able to have a really enjoyable family weekend. [buddy of 169F/I OC13].
>
> **Hostile independent**: Called home. I was so excited about talking to my parents but when they got on the phone, they couldn't have cared much less who they were talking to. I suddenly had this realization that I'm not all that important to them. For now, I've decided not to call them unless I'm sick or something like that. [147F/D SE08].
>
> **Pervasive independent**: I [took off for the United States] last [date], went to [state] with a friend, drove there. We said, "What should we do today?" It was fun. And we came back and [my parents] said, "You know, something could have happened", well, it didn't. They said, "Next time, tell me" and I say, "But you'd only worry" but they say, "We'd rather know where you are, just in case." But I generally don't tell them much... [M]y Dad's not really involved 'cause he's not around a lot. Or when he is, he's busy. [130M/I SE21].

In turn, students from these family types were differentially likely to report stability or change in their relationship with their parents over the course of the semester, sometimes in a positive direction, sometimes in a negative one. The following comments illustrate both stability and change, that either can be positively or negatively charged, and that the transition to university is often a process that affects parents as much (if not more) than it does their university bound offspring (incidentally generating much outrage among students who, naively, reasoned that since they were the ones going away, only they should be expected to change):

Interactional stability, positive affective charge: I don't really think my relationship with Mum is changing all that much; we were such good friends before that I don't think it'll change very drastically. [113F/D SE08].

Interactional stability, negative affective charge: As far as [the] relationship with my parents go, things haven't changed that much. I do talk with my Mom a lot more now. At the beginning of the semester, when I came home for the first couple of times my family was nice to me, I thought, "Wow, this is great!" But I realize now that nothing has really changed. The reason why they were nice to me was because I hadn't been around to do anything wrong. Nobody was really excited about me being home (except my dog) and they still weren't all that interested in hearing about what was going on in my life. That may be why I don't miss them; I reached a point... where I was really looking forward to leaving home [to go to university]. It wasn't just because I didn't want my parents telling me what to do, it was because I was sick of being around people who didn't want to listen to what I had to say. It's not like I have an awful family, in fact I think I'm luckier than a lot of people when it comes to a good family. I'm just the odd member, the different one who doesn't really belong. [147F/D DE01].

Interactional change, positive affective charge: [My mother] treats me, not a lot differently, but more like as her friend than just her daughter any more, like I'm more her good friend than her daughter and we seem to be on the same level whereas before I was always a young girl... when I went home last weekend, she goes, well, Dad and I were talking about [your sexuality] and we figured that

you're old enough and if you're going to decide to be sexually active then you will go on the pill. And I just looked at her and I thought, this isn't the same mother I knew before I went [to university]... and my Dad seems to be loving and caring toward me. Before we used to fight like cats and dogs and now we don't. [104F/I DE01].

Interactional change, negative affective charge: To my very dismay, my Mom is having a very hard time coping with me [being] gone, but she didn't make it evident to me. Like, I spoke to ... my Mom's friend. And she goes, "[Subject], [your Mom] talks about you all the time. She's so worried about you, she wants to come down and visit you." She wanted to come down on Homecoming Weekend, when there's toilet paper all over the campus and broken windows. And I said, "Mom, I don't think you should come down." It upset me a lot because I'm the one who's doing fine, I'm the one who should be having problems. Back home, they're supposed to be supporting me and I'm the one who's worrying about them. This must be really bizarre! [112F/I SE29]. My room [at home] felt like a hotel room, Mom's clothes in my closet, drawers; brother uses my desk as office space. [112F/D SE30].

Further, students' relationship with their parents, as with their friends and their romantic partners, was hardly independent of their psychological state, their academic achievement or their relations with other significant people in their lives. Rather, consistent evidence emerged of significant cross-linkages between them. The following comments illustrate such processes:

Went to write the 1st [course] module. I was pretty sure that I understood how to do everything and I got 10 [out of 10] on it. I was really happy; I felt like calling home but I realized that no one would be there. Over the day my joy fizzed out. [147F/D SE15].

Went to do homework. Didn't get much done. Want sister home, can't get anything done, bored without her. [105F/D OC08].

> [Boyfriend] calls to tell me he doesn't think he will be visiting. I am crushed as I hear these dreaded words, and my insides boil as though I have just drunken a glass of bleach. His Mom doesn't want him to go, and I remember her crying to me over the phone when [boyfriend] left home, how I was there to comfort her, now she won't let [boyfriend] and I be together! [112F/D SE22].

Domain 3: ENVIRONMENTAL

Finally, both academic and social processes unfolded within specific environmental contexts on campus. The **ENVIRONMENTAL** domain divides into **three** subdomains concerned, respectively, with **residence life, university campus,** and **university services.**

Subdomain: RESIDENCE LIFE. By far the most significant context concerned residence life where most participants spent the majority of their free time. In turn, this encompassed a range of activities, some positive, others negative, including: (a) activities related to student orientation; (b) the use (and abuse) of alcohol, especially by men; (c) control over private space, especially the degree to which the residence environment was experienced as socially intrusive; (d) the importance among women of re-creating 'home' within their residence room; and (e) the mixed assessment of residence assistants.

In the interest of space, only two of these issues will be illustrated with comments. The first concerns the typically divergent perceptions of orientation activities by females and males. In general, males preferred occasions characterized by action, excitement, and group involvement. In contrast, females tended to prefer occasions marked by intimate talk, face-to-face interaction and dyadic involvement. A dramatic and unusual case in point concerned the mock kidnapping of female students by male engineering students. By chance, two study participants were involved in this event. Here is their divergent accounts of it:

> Talked about the Engineering party where students "abducted" women students; saw it all [as] good fun; he himself would approach girls and invite them; if they were not interested, he would not insist; did not feel that any woman who went, went against her will. Girls who refused simply because they wanted to study were still brought along. The party was at a [course] prof's farm:

> bonfire, BBQ, a lot of beer; a few got drunk; four buses available to bring people and their "guests" back. [buddy of 116M/I SE23].

> Tonight [female] and I were in the [student union building] looking at posters when a bunch of engineers came in and started grabbing girls. I didn't know what was going on, so I tried to run away. Then some guy got me from behind and started to drag me out a door. I was pretty scared so I started to fight with him, but he wouldn't let me go. They were collecting girls, putting them on hayrides and not letting them go. I had heard of engineers kidnapping girls, getting them drunk and taking advantage of them, but I didn't really believe it was going to happen. [Female] and I ended up jumping off the hayride and running for our lives. (We escaped.) I have never felt so helpless before in my entire life. I wanted to go home right then. Sometimes I just don't feel very safe here. [119F/D SE19].

The second issue selected for illustration concerns 'home' since this too is based on consistent differences between females and males. Thus, among female students **only**, 'home' had three quite different meanings. First, 'home' referred to their family of origin, and was used in the sense of 'going home for Thanksgiving'. Second, 'home' meant decorating their residence room so that it had the key attributes of home, that is, familiarity, security, personal possessions and a sense of permanence. So important were these attributes that their presence or absence supported or interfered with the academic work of female students, as in the following examples:

> As soon as I opened the door, relief filled my heart. The room was huge! Much bigger than I had remembered. It was the <u>best</u> surprise I could have hoped for. I jumped around, mentally noting where all my stuffed animals and pictures would go, never shutting up about how big the room was ... I spent the afternoon claiming my territory, organizing my room and chatting with [roommate]. [112F/D SE12].

> [My father] was told I was in room [number] of [residence]. I was happy with that, but when I arrived I found out that my room is temporary. Four of us (two have not shown yet!) are in a study room. The phone only just arrived (and will work in an hour), there are three desks (cubicles!), three lights (one works!) and a few drawers. I need to set [down] some "roots." I feel completely out of place because it seems more like camp and I'll be going home in a few weeks (right now I wish I was). I need to be able to unpack my things, set up my desk, put up posters, and make this [room] my home. [154F/D SE06].

Third, 'home' is used to denote a particular sort of relational environment, one in which one knows a range of significant others and is known by them intimately and thoroughly. Consequently, the variety of assumptions and nuances of meaning embedded in ones own speech and that of others do not require repeated explanation; they are simply known and, as such, continually reinforce ones social identity. The absence of such intimate knowledge among freshman students made for interaction which repeatedly emphasized the distance between students and thus not only slowed the reconstruction of intimate relations but made, temporarily at least, for a special kind of loneliness, one that several participants had never experienced before. Consider the following examples:

> Good to be home - treated special, with people who <u>know</u> you. No need to explain yourself or worrying of dwelling in misery because no one reads your cues [112F/D SE30].
>
> Felt more comfortable at home. Saw girlfriend [name] (friends since age 7) which brought back some of my identity (we know how much we mean to each other). Again, felt secure knowing didn't have to explain myself to [female]. She <u>understands</u> me, knows what makes me tick. Biggest difference in university if [you] don't have a good friend with you, [you] get sick of explaining yourself [to others]. [112F/D OC07].

> The first couple of weeks weren't a problem for me at all because I was on such a high of being here that everything was new and exciting as opposed to being frightening. Around about the middle of October, after coming back from Thanksgiving, I got onto a real, "Boy, am I homesick!" Not so

much for physical home, but just having friends around that I've known for more than four weeks! People who knew how I thought and how I worked and what things bugged me and that I could just sit down and talk for hours about absolutely nothing with. I found that that's the biggest thing here, is getting used to the fact that there aren't any really close friends here. [113F/I DE16].

Subdomain: UNIVERSITY CAMPUS. Additional environmental observations related to females perception of the physical beauty of the Guelph campus, and their fears about their personal safety. What follows is one illustration of the latter:

Tonight I went with my house on a trip to the Whippletree [Restaurant]. I had a great time because I got to meet some of the other girls in the house. After, we went to the Bullring. At about 11:00 PM, some girls started to leave, but they were leaving by themselves. Even my RA left by herself. I did not want to walk home alone, so a friend of mine named [male] said he would walk me back to the residence. Once we got to the entrance, I told him I would be fine from there, so he left. Then a guy followed me. I had never seen this guy before, so I went up to [male's] room. [The guy following me] walked past, and I thought he was gone, so I walked back to my room. He had waited, and followed me back. I locked the door and stayed in my room. Then I phoned [female] and talked to her until I felt more safe. [119F/D SE28].

Subdomain: UNIVERSITY SERVICES. The final environmental context in which students observations apply concerns the character and quality of the food offered in on-campus cafeterias; and, the mixed relationship between students and university service staff. As regards the latter, the following comments suggest that any difficulty in such relations derives not merely from the staff, but also from the students:

We finally went for breakfast around 11:30 [AM]. There's an older lady who's a cashier at [residence]. She's been there quite a lot since I got here, and I like her. She seems genuinely

> interested in the people she's serving. She's kind of mothering, too; always calls you "dear". [113F/D SE10].

> I feel sorry for the people working in the cafeteria. Very often I observe the students to be quite rude to the staff. That's not fair. They only work there after all, and are just following [the] rules. [133F/D SE21].

DISCUSSION

This study was designed in such a way as to provide a context in which freshmen could provide an authentic account of their daily experience relatively free of recall bias or adult intrusion. This reliance on qualitative methods may be construed as a rejection of quantitative analysis. Such a construction would be most unfortunate. Indeed, as will become apparent in a future article (see Benjamin, in press), it was the triangular character of the design, combining qualitative and quantitative elements, which accounts for the potence of the findings. Rather, the point is that quantitative analysis has its place, but also its limitations. The former apply under two conditions: when a substantial database already exists, and a research question is to be examined of sufficient specificity and exactitude as to warrant a precise answer. When either or both are not the case, the premature application of quantitative analysis may inadvertently distort as much as it clarifies. Worse, its very precision may trick researchers into a false sense of security, accepting as factual a statistically significant answer to what may very well be the wrong question!

To make matters worse, research participants, socialized as students to compliance with higher authority, may compound this category of error. Willingly responding to all standardized questions handed them, such students may happily provide researchers with what they think is desired while disqualifying their own sense that these may be the wrong questions, do not reflect their own experience and/or force them to select from what they perceive as an inaccurate or incomplete response set.

The ultimate result is an accumulated picture of **the** 'average' freshman student as **researchers** see him or her, **not** as they see themselves. And it is in light of this partial fiction - comprised in equal parts of researchers' reconstructed experience as students, their expectations, their values, indeed their longing for some illusory ideal - that futher research has been designed and policy enacted.

The alternative is to allow freshmen to tell their own story and see where it leads, whether or not researchers like the journey or the destination. In the present instance, this portion of the findings, albeit incomplete, nevertheless yield a number of central insights some of which are novel, others merely supportive of accepted wisdom. In this context, a brief higher-order summary of the critical elements in students accounts of the personal aspect of their daily experience is instructive.

First, and perhaps most important, what was striking about students accounts of their daily experience was its ecological complexity, with the whole emerging out of the interaction among its constituent domain elements. In consequence, it is both misleading and inaccurate to speak about these students as "students," "children," "friends," and the like, for they were singularly none of these things; rather, they were **all** of them simultaneously, striving, as whole persons, to achieve a workable balance between the social and the academic, the personal and the impersonal, the subjective and the objective.

This said, students' experience in each domain did **not** contribute to this whole in equal measure, for students' accounts made clear that, at its most meaningful, university life for them was constituted out of their daily interaction with those others significant to them: their parents, their friends (old and new), and their lovers. On balance, during their first semester at university, these relations formed the foreground of their experience, with academic concerns, however important, relegated to the background.

Second, movement from high school to university involved massive dislocation in students' daily lives, including their daily routine (ie., sleeping, eating, residence, event scheduling, etc.), in academic life, (ie., workload, classroom attendance, student-professor relations, etc.), and, in social relations (ie., meeting new peers and related new assumptions, expectations, etc.). The common result was significant transitional stress. For a minority of students, this involved "eustress" (Selye, 1974), that is, **enjoyable challenge**, and was associated with a range of positive feelings (eg., excitement, enthusiasm, etc.). For a minority, this

involved "distress" (Selye, 1974), that is, **overwhelming demand**, and was associated with a range of negative feelings (eg., fear, anxiety, uncertainty, etc.). For the majority, some combination of both were typical, with students distributed along a continuum of transitional stress.

In this context, relations between students and significant others were not 'merely' part of the process of adjustment. Rather, they **were** that process, with university life constituted in large measure out of students' dealings with those people who made up their social world. These others (friends, romantic partners, family members), many of them living some distance from the university, cannot simply be bracketed out of existence by theoretical fiat - for example, see Tinto's (1987) model of student attrition - for doing so fundamentally distorts any reasonable understanding of students' daily experience. On similar grounds, significant others cannot be consigned to the substantively empty void of "the environment." Such figure-ground sleight of hand fails to recognize the context-specific manner in which students' adjustment was mediated by on-going relations with specific others with whom they routinely interacted. Taken seriously, these insights suggest that adjustment be viewed as a **social process** with psychological overtones, **not**, as in the literature, a psychological state with social consequences. In turn, this implies that students' cognitive and affective processes were seldom entirely **personal**; rather, the relationship between psychological and interpersonal processes appears reciprocal, with the boundary between them decidedly fuzzy. Thus, what was technically "outside" was represented "inside" in the form of socially constructed patterns of thought, feeling and behavior. Similarly, what was "inside" routinely got "out" as students interacted with, and thus influenced, the thoughts, feelings and behaviors of those who made up their network of others.

Third, while various aspects of students' daily experiences were viewed in much the same way by men and women, many more were different and disparate. Indeed, many variables showed marked variation by gender, most of them in the interpersonal domain. Such differences are noteworthy insofar as they cut across a range of dimensions, dimensions which, collectively, account for much of students daily experience. Consequently, such differences tend to qualify much of what has already been said, above.

Fourth, there is a natural tendency to characterize freshmen by selective reference to a handful of central tendencies among the total population (for example, average age). Once in place, such characterizations tend to get carried over into the worlds of research and programming. Indeed, given this perspective, it is a simple matter to slide noiselessly from speaking about 'freshmen' (plural) to speaking about 'the freshman student' (singular). The findings of this study argue strenuously against such practices, however 'natural' they may be. Indeed, study participants were characterized **not** by their homogeneity, but rather by their extraordinary variety. In typological terms, for example, it was possible to reliably distinguish between four family types, three roommate categories, three romantic others groups, and three sets of friends, with gender differences yet another source of variation. Thus, heterogeneity was the order of the day. Seen through this lens, efforts to narrow attention to selective central tendencies can correctly be seen as the imposition of a simple conceptualization on a complex phenomenon. The inevitable minimum results are slippage and distortion.

Finally, students' accounts of their daily experience were divided into three domains concerned, respectively, with personal, interpersonal and environmental matters. Given the complexity of the findings, it is now clear that that was essential for analytic clarity. Nevertheless, such a division violates the ecological integrity of the data insofar as it obscures the cross-linkages both between domains as well as across subdomains within a given domain. Indeed, evidence of such cross-linkages was pervasive. On the one hand, this serves to place in context the unidimensional studies which are so common in this literature. On the other hand, they underscore the importance of an ecological perspective on freshman experience in future efforts at research or policy formulation.

In closing, at least three questions have yet to be addressed, namely, (a) what (if anything) can or should be done in light of these data?; (b) what weight should be accorded the findings?; and (c) how seriously should such data be regarded?

The answer to the first question is neither simple nor succinct. Accordingly, it will take up much of a future article. As for the second question, some caution would be quite appropriate. This study was conceived as a pilot, and as such was hardly free of error. For example, it is now apparent that students are

most unlikely to deal in any depth with some issues in their diaries, such that a significantly modified interview protocol is indicated. Similarly, the presence of only four male students is worrisome and certainly mitigates any confidence one might have in the findings, despite the fact that substantial congruence between study data and the literature was evident (see Rubin, 1985). However, the standard objection concerning the (small) sample size is not of concern. As will now be evident, the accent on depth in qualitative research makes it both impractical and unnecessary to assemble large samples (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984). Rather, on the assumption that those who share a given experience will in some central respects share related perceptions of it (Lofland & Lofland, 1984; Taylor & Bogdan, 1984), the central concern of such research is to fully appreciate how research participants see and understand their world. The present study provides just such an understanding of freshman students.

Lastly, as regards the final question, how seriously should we take such data, the answer is very seriously indeed. As suggested earlier, there are very few contexts in this literature in which students can speak about their experience without being guided or directed in some way by adult concerns and interests. Moreover, the present account suggests that for some freshmen there is much about the way the university is presently organized that is counterproductive and thus inhibits their adjustments as well as their academic achievement. This is an unsettling picture, and insofar as it implies the need for change, is likely to be treated by some combination of disbelief and/or dismissal. Many of the difficulties described will be waved aside as the result of inadequate preparation at the high school level, as a function of student immaturity (or lack of discipline, student habits, responsibility, and so on) or as involving personal factors over which university personnel either do not or ought not have any responsibility and/or control. While entirely understandable, and likely true in part, such responses fly in the face of an increasing commitment among North American universities and colleges towards student development in general and the development of the "whole person" in particular (Rodgers, 1989; cf. Bloland, 1986). It is towards just such development that the students in this study appear to be striving. If in the process they appear to make social rather than academic choices, it is because these entering students appear to gain more from their significant others than from faculty and other university personnel. We should hardly be surprised, for becoming significant to

another takes time, respect, and trust. The first step in acquiring the trust of freshmen, in becoming significant to them, surely requires that we listen.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the thrust of this approach in general and of these data in particular is twofold: (a) it has immense explanatory and descriptive utility; and (b) it stands in sharp contrast to the bulk of the available research literature. This approach provides a means of constructing an authentic account of student experience that is both faithful to the participants as well as sensitive to the issue of ecological validity. The result is a database that is enormously rich in detail yet relatively free of adult distortion. In turn, it provides data that is unique in its utility for the development of theory, the design of future research, and the creation and/or the revision of institutional policies and practices. Such utility stands in contrast to much of the existing literature. This is not to suggest that the latter is not similarly useful, but rather that its interpretation requires qualification by placement within the larger context suggested by studies such as this. Thus, the upshot of even this portion of the larger study is to recognize, as Pascarella and Terenzini (1991) have recently done, the need for more qualitative studies of student experience.

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